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## Challenge of the Century

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by *Robin Moore*

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Only 30 per cent showed any evidence of planning their meals with any knowledge of nutrition. For a third to a half of the homemakers there was no evidence of any nutritional knowledge at all! Studies in Virginia have suggested very similar percentages for urban groups and even as high as 69 per cent for rural homemakers.

# Challenge of the Century

Three fourths of these  
homemakers had never  
heard of the basic seven

RECENTLY A STUDY of 664 homemakers was undertaken in two upstate New York towns to determine how much nutritional knowledge these women used in feeding their family and whether this knowledge was related to various socio-economic factors. Nutritional knowledge was assessed at an interview by the answers to such simple questions as: "What should be included in the meals for the family each day?" "What is a balanced diet?" and "What is the basic seven?"

Almost all homemakers listed the conventional foods such as meat or meat substitutes, potatoes and other fruits and vegetables, as food to be served each day. Fewer mentioned milk or milk products, bread and cereals. Only 10 per cent suggested foods not obvious without some nutritional knowledge, such as leafy, green and yellow vegetables or Vitamin C rich fruits.

At best only about one third of the homemakers could give any nutritional reason for the foods they served their families. Of this third, considerably more homemakers had some idea of the value of meat, potatoes, fruits and vegetables, however, than they did for milk. For service of the less commonly mentioned foods, even fewer women could find any adequate reason.

Obviously the greatest need for education both in the need to serve and the reason for serving certain foods, is in the Vitamin A and C rich fruits and vegetables. Few homemakers saw any nutritional reason for the use of bread and cereals. Only 10 per cent used them as other than "filling," "habit" or "to make sandwiches." The same was true for butter and fortified margarine, only 25 per cent of the homemakers were even aware that these foods contained fat and less than half of these women knew of the Vitamin A content.

The homemaker's knowledge was assessed on the number of food groups she listed as serving her family and how many of these she had a reason for using.

To all but one fourth of the homemakers a "balanced diet" had no meaning — many had never heard the term. About three fourths had never heard of the "basic seven." Milk all too often was served only for children. Foods which were interchangeable and good substitutes for basic seven foods were little known, with the exception of meat, fish and poultry.

On the basis of age, young homemakers had more knowledge than middle aged, who in turn knew considerably more than the old-timers. The higher the educational attainment, the greater the nutritional knowledge.

Where does the homemaker acquire the information she does have? Nearly half the women reported they had at sometime "studied about what to eat." By far the greatest majority had learned what they knew at school. Few had studied under such programs as Red Cross classes, Home Bureau and cooking schools. Similar trends were reported from Virginia where the best knowledge of nutrition was found in homemakers under 45, with moderate incomes and high school or college education.

Luckily the homemaker's actual feeding of her family is considerably better than her theoretical knowledge. But foods about which she knows least, of course, were also the most poorly used. Again those who had "studied," fed their family better both qualitatively and quantitatively. Age, education and income were related in the same way to actual food habits as to basic knowledge.

Only about a third of the homemakers felt that they had any problems in planning, buying or preparing food. Meal planning bothered them most, as did the problems of food costs and motivating the family to eat various foods. The homemakers felt they needed help with quick menus, food habits and special diets. It was the younger homemakers who felt their deficiencies most and indicated the greatest desire for help. Ninety-two per cent felt that their families were getting all the foods they needed, and for only a third would more money for food make any changes in the meal pattern.

This then is the challenge! Improvement of family eating habits is up to the homemaker. More and better education for her is the answer to her problems. It is up to we who are trained in the field of home economics and nutrition to see that she gets this education.